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COUNCIL REAFFIRMS PRIORITY OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY LAW

During its February 1-4, 1987, meeting in Miami, Florida, the National Council on the Handicapped reiterated its commitment to the enactment of a comprehensive statute guaranteeing equal opportunity for persons with disabilities. Such a law, tentatively referred to as "The Americans with Disabilities Act" by the Council, was one of the primary recommendations presented to the President and the Congress in the Council's 1986 report, Toward Independence. At its recent meeting, the Council reasserted its belief in the need for a law providing protection from discrimination on the basis of handicap with as broad coverage as current laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, and selected the promotion of such a statute as one of its major priorities for 1987.

As envisioned by the Council, the Americans with Disabilities Act would apply a broad prohibition of discrimination against persons with disabilities to employers engaged in interstate commerce, to public accommodations, to providers of housing, and to other agencies and persons covered by other types of civil rights laws. The statute would clearly delineate certain requirements included in the general prohibition of discrimination -- duties to remove architectural, transportation, and communication barriers; to provide

individualized reasonable accommodations; and to eliminate discriminatory qualifications standards and eligibility criteria. The Council's proposal would maintain prohibitions against discrimination in existing Federal regulations such as those issued pursuant to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, by providing that no regulations issued under the Americans with Disabilities Act could provide less protection to persons with disabilities than under existing regulations.

In developing the recommendation of a comprehensive equal opportunity law and the other legislative proposals contained in Toward Independence, the Council had consulted with more than 2,000 members of the disability community, conducted meetings in each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, and obtained input from representatives and prominent members of a large number of organizations dealing with all types of disabilities. The Council members noted that time after time people with disabilities had asserted that comprehensive protection from discrimination was the number one need that the Council should address.